

Lecture One

The *Gilgamesh* Epic

Scope: *Gilgamesh*, the oldest known epic, has exerted an influence on Semitic mythology as seen in the initial part of the Hebrew Bible. Many of the elements of epic literature, including a legitimization of political life, an articulation of moral norms, and an explanation of the material world, are elaborated in a more complex way in the Pentateuch of the Hebrew Bible. *Gilgamesh* offers a useful historical context within which to place our inquiry into biblical literature.

Outline

- I. The Mesopotamian epic of *Gilgamesh* exerted a strong influence on the Biblical tradition.
 - A. As old as the Bible is, it is predated by the epic of *Gilgamesh*.
 1. Parts of this ancient epic were borrowed into the Biblical tradition.
 2. The *Gilgamesh* also helps us consider the question of how separate stories are merged together to make a unified whole, an important issue when studying the Bible.
 3. As old as *Gilgamesh* is, and although versions of it were handed down for centuries in the ancient Near East, our knowledge of it is only a little more than a century old, when enough tablets were pieced together and translated.
 4. Thus, it is probable that separate stories (Hittite, Akkadian, Babylonian) were merged as invaders absorbed older cultures and redacted the stories. The protagonist, *Gilgamesh*, was a king in about 2700 B.C.
- II. The epic is the most archaic form of storytelling.
 - A. An epic can be likened to an encyclopedia
 1. It is not just a literary exercise, but a compilation of knowledge on such subjects as politics, law, ethics, physics and more.
 2. In the time that *Gilgamesh* and other ancient (though younger) epics arose, literacy was rare, so the stories were transferred by oral tradition. This is true of the Hebrew Bible as well.
 - B. Epics share certain characteristics.
 1. There are certain milestones.
 2. There is always a journey.
 3. There is always a hero who represents the group that produced the epic and who is a moral paragon.

4. The epic legitimizes the political powers-that-be. Epics are not revolutionary, but rather politically conservative.
5. The hero is somehow chosen above others and is beloved of the gods; divine intervention is involved in the story.

III. The story of *Gilgamesh* narrates the inherent tension between the human and the divine. A review of the plot, or story line, is necessary to elucidate the many themes.

- A. *Gilgamesh*, the hero, is king of Uruk, a holy city protected by the Babylonian gods. The story involves his relationship with a "double," Enkidu.
 1. Enkidu is an outsider, a hunter, a 'natural man' who can talk to animals. Enkidu is seduced by a temple prostitute, who gives him wine, civilizes him and brings him into the city, symbolizing his loss of innocence.
 2. Enkidu and *Gilgamesh* face off and have a fight, which ends with both becoming fast friends. They undertake an expedition to kill the monster Humbaba, who guards the cedar trees, an important resource. Some interpret this feat as a raid for plunder by the two warriors.
 3. They slay the monster, win the wood and *Gilgamesh* then has a dream, which Enkidu interprets for him.
 4. Next, the goddess Ishtar appears, seeking a lover, but *Gilgamesh* rebuffs her. *Gilgamesh* himself is a demi-god, half-divine, half-mortal. Ishtar, in anger, tells her father, Anu, of *Gilgamesh*'s insult.
 5. Anu sends down the Bull of Heaven, and the kingdom of Uruk has seven years of famine and earthquakes. Enkidu and *Gilgamesh* kill the bull. This theme of tension between the human and the divine is a major one in this epic.
- B. The death of Enkidu is a traumatic event for *Gilgamesh*, one that causes him to undertake a long journey to seek answers and immortality.
 1. Enkidu insults Ishtar, and the gods decide that one of the pair must die. It is Enkidu, who sickens. He curses the temple prostitute who "civilized" him, but relents and faces his death in the city.
 2. *Gilgamesh* mourns the loss of his close friend. He realizes they are mirror images and that he, too, will die someday. This is a key revelation, the realization of a bounded ego, and launches him on his quest to find immortality.
 3. The journey is long. *Gilgamesh* goes to see King Utnapishtim, who lives near Paradise; he will never die, having survived a great flood. Here is a pre-figurement of Noah and the Biblical flood. *Gilgamesh* crosses paths with scorpion men and a cosmic barmaid

Suduri; in each case, he asks directions. This prefigures the *Odyssey*, perhaps more specifically Circe and Calypso.

4. Eventually, Gilgamesh crosses the waters of Death, which is a common theme in epics. He reaches Utnapishtim, who tells Gilgamesh that he cannot help him; sooner or later, he will die. This is the beginning of subjectivity, when you do not see yourself in the Other until you realize that you will die too.
5. Gilgamesh hears out the story of the flood. Utnapishtim says that if Gilgamesh can stay awake for seven days, maybe he can help him. Gilgamesh tries, but fails. Then King Utnapishtim wife convinces him to tell Gilgamesh about the plant of eternal life. This story is basically 'crammed in' to the basic narrative; we can see the pre-figurement of the tree of knowledge in the Garden of Eden.
6. Gilgamesh gets this plant and heads home; however, he stops to bathe, leaving the plant with his clothes. A snake appears and eats the plant, again a pre-figurement of the serpent in Genesis.
7. The snake is really a *deus ex machina*, used to explain why people die, why snakes shed their skins ("live forever").
8. The story also sheds light on the theme of searching for selfhood, and ends with Gilgamesh returning to "Uruk of the sheep-gate" to live, and eventually to die.

IV. Many Biblical themes, from Mother Eve to the Flood, are echoed in the Gilgamesh story.

A. Let us consider first the following themes of women and civilization:

1. Mother Eve tempted by a serpent.
2. The sexual temptation of Enkidu (by the temple prostitute) and of Gilgamesh (by Ishtar).
3. The difference between, and the translation from, nature and the civilized city.
4. Ishtar and Gilgamesh point out the recognition of the separation of the human and divine. The indirect connection between the two (recall that Gilgamesh is partly divine, but does not have immortality); this is the invention of the "human condition."

B. Next, let's consider myth versus history. They begin as the same thing, but what happens?

1. What does Humbaba represent? Perhaps the "monster" is the personification of a tribe of people that opposed Gilgamesh and the city of Uruk. This is the stuff of epic (after all, you don't go fight with a weaker foe to gain glory). In the Bible, we might look at David and Goliath.
2. The friendship between Enkidu and Gilgamesh is the symbolic unification of two tribes. Initially enemies, they unite their efforts.

C. Predictability and covenant comprise the third broad theme.

1. Why is the Bible full of promises? Ishtar, unlike Yahweh, doesn't know how to solve the problem of the flood. This points up one of the problems with polytheism. Who do you turn to with confidence? There is no covenant with Ishtar.
2. Covenant is required if you are actually going to worship God. The deity must be competent and trustworthy.

D. Redaction is another theme that we must address.

1. *Gilgamesh*, like the Bible, is cobbled together. For example, we have two creation myths in Genesis.
2. This pulling together of various stories, perhaps constructed, or certainly modified over a span of time, explains the world in a coherent way.

E. Finally, we have to look at what Gilgamesh says to use about the shift from myth to other ways at looking at the world.

1. Ancient knowledge says "all is one." Astronomy and astrology are the same; magic and mathematics are the same; physics and theology are the same.
2. Overall, the story of Gilgamesh shows us that the archaic "dream time" of humanity is ending. Man no longer lives exclusively in the mythological world. This impels him to create a big picture narrative, which reflects an underlying shift in mankind's conception of Self.

V. The epic form displays a number of paradigmatic motifs.

A. Since our subject is the Bible, it is instructive to outline these motifs.

1. Epics must have heroes, usually military (the "Chosen People" of Exodus; David, Solomon and other military-political heroes).
2. Epics have journeys, as noted above (the coming out of Egypt, the Diaspora, Paul's journey; in Islamic scripture, the journey from Medina to Mecca).
3. Epics have a quest for the valuable (the 'Promised Land,' salvation and eternal life, the Kingdom of God).
4. Every epic has a homecoming (arrival in the "Promised Land"). This homecoming involves the triumph of the sacred over the profane.
5. Epics reinforce our collective identity.

B. If we consider the hero of the Bible to be the collective Hebrew people as opposed to strictly the many 'heroes' we meet in its pages, and this collective people is moving on a great journey, then all the events of history are vindicated as trials, as God's way of testing the "Chosen." They are not arbitrary punishments inflicted by non-covenanted divinities.

1. The Bible can be thought of as having important connections to epic literature. It is creating an universal moral code.
2. The process of having God revealed is a redescription of the process of moral self-discovery. The Bible is an epic of moral self-invention.

Essential Reading:

Sanders, *in toto*.

Supplementary Reading:

Tigay, especially Chap. 1, but the whole book is well worth reading.

Questions to Consider:

1. What are the most important continuities between the *Gilgamesh* epic and the Hebrew Bible?
2. What are the main characteristics of the Mesopotamian gods? How do they compare with the one God of the Hebrews?

Lecture Two

Genesis: Introduction to Biblical Study

Scope: The *Book of Genesis* contains two creation stories, which are redacted from earlier traditions. It contains as well the initial covenant between God and His chosen people. The *Book of Genesis* describes the early history of humanity and emphasizes human depravity and the tendency toward sin in the absence of the Law. In *Genesis*, God's blessing takes the form of life, both individual and familial. The issue of God's Providence is addressed, causing Joseph and his brothers to immigrate to Egypt, preparing the way for the forthcoming Exodus.

Outline

- I. The Bible has exerted a pervasive influence on Western culture.
 - A. The Bible as art is, in a way, a paradox, since it is supposed to be a divine book, the revealed word of God, right down to the punctuation. In this sense, it is no mere artifact.
 - B. Yet it is undeniable that the Bible has had an enormous influence on aesthetics. Thus, this venerated book must be introduced in context of a number of problems and challenges.
 - C. These lectures will not undertake scriptural exegesis, like that rendered by rabbis, imams or Church Fathers. On the other hand, we shouldn't allow these scholars to deter us from considering the Bible in a different light.
 - D. The Bible's influence extends beyond any one orthodoxy. It tells unforgettable stories in an unforgettable way. In these lectures, we will not endorse any particular dogmatic approach. However, it is naive to think that we can take only a totally dispassionate "bird's eye view." Every interpreter must take a stand.
- II. The Bible is a historical work in several senses: a work of history, *qua* history; an expression of meaning realized through history; and finally, an historical work differently constructed over time.
 - A. The first context is as a work of history, as such.
 1. The Bible tells a story that has a beginning, middle and end. It starts with creation and narrates the interaction between God and the people of earth, and especially his election of one group of those people.
 2. This is a special kind of history, with the divine power participating in the ebb and flow of human events. Thus, time takes the shape of the destiny toward which God is going.

B. The God of the Hebrew Bible does not resemble other ancient gods.

1. Once they create, they don't come back much. But the Hebrew God, once He has created the world, doesn't retreat, but comes back repeatedly.
2. He doesn't intervene whimsically or impulsively in the affairs of mankind, but rather binds himself with pledges and promises, thus connecting Himself to human history.

C. The Bible's nature as history suggests that it's not simply an abstract statement of law, or some mere religious mantra. Rather, this is a dramatic story that manifests itself through human time.

III. Considering the second context, the meaning of the Bible has unfolded through time.

A. This is a key concept in considering the Bible.

1. The meaning of the Scripture for people unfolds through time. The Law is given to certain people only at a certain time. Yet divine directives are often disregarded.
2. Anyone reading the Bible now will not "unfold" for all time; meaning, then, is historical too.

B. We must ask how can we know what the meaning of any book is?

1. Scholars who find a single, perfect meaning in the Bible seem to take a religious tack, not necessarily an aesthetic one.
2. Even scholars denying meaning, or the possibility of meaning, are practicing a type of negative theology.

C. We must consider the historical role of meaning. We think of texts as having authentic messages. But in considering the Bible, we must separate divine revelation from human reception.

1. Interpretation is always needed and is always going on. That it is always required is revealed from the beginning in Genesis.
2. This acknowledgement affects the conception of God going forward from this point.

D. The Bible is always a matter of interpretation. But sooner or later we must arrive somewhere. Interpretation makes a text continually new or relevant. When Jeremiah describes Jerusalem after its destruction by the Babylonians, a very historical event, he says it was without form, a void. This is a clear renewing of the Genesis text of the Creation.

IV. Interpretation and reinterpretation of the Bible is constant.

A. Interpretation is a vital resource for assaying the meaning of the Bible. Midrash or inquiry is going on as interpretation in the tradition of

rabbinical Judaism. Yet at the same time, the Torah (the Law of Moses or the Pentateuch) had to be read in the old form.

B. Ongoing interpretation is very important in relation to the New Testament; in fact, without it, we wouldn't have the New Testament.

1. The Christian Bible shows Christ's life as the fulfillment of the Hebrew Scripture. Thus it transforms the Hebrew Bible, which is renamed the Old Testament.
2. Islam continues this by establishing both Abraham and Jesus as prophets to ultimate revelations.

C. Only certain sets of books were included in establishing the canon of both the Old and New Testament. There are, indeed, more than one Bible.

1. Both Testaments were written in common languages: Old Testament in Hebrew and Aramaic; New Testament in Greek and Aramaic.
2. In time, the context of the Bible changed. When the Roman emperor Constantine converted, the Bible was translated into Latin. Later, it was translated into other languages, e.g., German and English as a result of the Reformation.
3. There are, then, different Bibles over time. How can we get to authenticity? Even the Hebrew Bible is problematical.
4. We must acknowledge a great variety of literary forms in the Bible as we know it, which indicates many possibilities for interpretation.

V. The Pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible) is the heart of the scriptures for many people, and it begins with *Genesis*.

A. The Pentateuch starts with creation and ends with the death of Moses, the last prophet who saw God face-to-face. It is not unrelieved patriotism, since Israel has many failings. The Law extracted an historical price for the following of it.

B. Archaeological research indicates that the Pentateuch recalls oral traditions going back to the early Bronze Age (perhaps around 3,500 B.C.). Thus, these books give Jewish believers a sense of identity and a hope of great things.

C. It is perhaps instructive that Genesis does not begin with the Patriarchs, but rather with Creation. It tells why things are the way they are.

1. The narrative demonstrates the ancient fear of chaos. God utters a word and things come into being in a certain order.
2. There is concern to separate the waters; the account of creation ends with the Flood.

3. Genesis also explains the world's social and religious, not just physical, forms. Creation ends with the observance of the first Sabbath; time has thus been ordered.
 4. Other things explained by Genesis include: why there are languages, rainbows, death, why women have sexual desire, why snakes are repulsive and so on.
 5. As for social concerns, Noah has three sons, Ham, Japeth and Shem. Abraham's nephew, Lot, and his family are another genealogy, not as favored as that of Noah. This is basically a map of the world: twelve tribes surrounded by others. This is the way it is directed to be, according to Genesis.
- D.** But there are many twists, almost to the point where some of these events seem like God-inspired accidents.
1. Inheritance, good or bad, is carried on from one generation to the next.
 2. The Bible is very interested with species, things reproducing after their own kind.
- E.** The one thing that provides cohesion throughout is the Covenant. There are three major examples, each more explicit than the last:
1. The Covenant with Noah, marked by the sign of the rainbow.
 2. The Covenant with Abraham, marked by the sign of circumcision.
 3. The Sinai Covenant with Moses, in which one tradition has it that God reveals His name.
 4. The notion of the Covenant helps us understand the Bible. God is acting freely, not just rewarding mankind. Yahweh is not just a providential God, but the unexpected savior (e.g., in the story of Joseph).

Essential Reading:

The Book of Genesis, *in toto*. Read whichever version of the Bible you prefer. It might be interesting to compare older translations, such as the King James, with more recent, 'contemporary' translations.

Supplementary Reading:

Prickett, Chap. 1-3.
Fox, *in toto*.

Questions to Consider:

1. What is the importance of second sons in *Genesis*?
2. What are the implications of the fact that two accounts of the creation of the world are given in Genesis?

Lecture Three

Exodus: Toward the Law

Scope: The *Book of Exodus* is a book of liberation, both political and spiritual. Moses leads the Israelites out of Egypt culminating in a renewal of the covenant with Yahweh when He gives the Decalogue to Moses on Mount Sinai. Yet the chosen people continue to sin. While wandering through the "wilderness of sin," the surroundings mirror the spiritual darkness of those who transgress the Law.

Outline

- I. Exodus consists of two major sections: the deliverance of God's people and the establishment of the Covenant. We need to examine in some detail the relationship between the two sections.
 - A. The first half of the Book of Exodus contains the accounts of the parting of the Red (or "Reed") Sea, the Ten Commandments, the tabernacle, the plagues and a good many familiar stories.
 - B. The second half elaborates the terms of the Covenant, covering such point as the treatment of wives, building places of worship, the investiture of the priesthood, details of legal correctness.
- II. The relationship between the part of *Exodus* revolve around deliverance and the Law.
 - A. God's deliverance proves his power and beneficence. But there is also the Covenant, even in the beginning of the book's first half. The episode of the burning bush tells Moses that he has been elected to be a prophet.
 - B. There is the significance of double titles. In Greek, *exodus* means 'the way out.' The Hebrews sometimes called it "the book of names." An interest in genealogy goes to the very idea of the Covenant: the new law of Exodus is connected with the Covenant of the Patriarchs. But even the status of the Law changes in this book.
- III. The Mosaic tradition shares many themes with other great literature of the Mediterranean.
 - A. The events portrayed in *Exodus* revolve around Moses, who writes down the laws (or the Law) and brings the tablets down from Mount Sinai. Authorship of the Pentateuch is ascribed to him.
 - B. The structure of the book explains why it is so gripping, and in this sense can be compared to other Mediterranean literature.

1. For just one example, compare Moses with Oedipus. Both have quasi-royal parentage: Moses is raised by the Pharaoh's daughter; Oedipus is shunted off to the shepherds in similar way.
2. There is great irony in both accounts: Oedipus is born royal, but grows up thinking he isn't royal, yet performs royal acts to win his crown, marrying into his own royal family as it turns out. Moses is a Hebrew child, but is raised as an Egyptian prince.
3. In both stories, the child (we might even term him the "attacked baby") carries a great many things (conflicts? contradictions?) within him.
4. Other parallel themes include: a hero raised far from home; a departure in quest of a future kingdom; conquest of a great opponent; a fall or major setback; a mysterious death.

IV. Historical evidence from the era corroborates much of what we read in Exodus.

- A. Something did appear to happen around the thirteenth to twelfth centuries B.C. Hebrews were in Egypt working on monumental structures. We know of dynastic change at the time that Joseph had his reversal of fortune.
 - B. The Hebrews at this time were consolidated into political and religious community under one God.
 - C. Moses is a good Egyptian name. He's found, raised and named by an Egyptian princess. But her name plays on a Hebrew pun. The name and the story converge.
- V. Exodus bears witness to the cultural and legal transformation of the "people of the book."
- A. We need to ask why such an elaborate hero? The answer is that it's a time of consolidation: one theocratic nation under God. But there is an additional social transformation, that of semi-pastoral clans to a settled agricultural nation.
 - B. A differentiated society comes into being, one complete with an army, judges, priests.
 - C. The greatest transformation is in the Law. Not only does it become more elaborate, but also it is made solid and it is written down.
 1. This is a significant moment for the Hebrew people. With Sinai, the Law becomes stone, durable, immutable, possessed by, and visible to, the people.
 2. Up to this point, the Law has been delivered in oral conversation. Adam talked to God, Noah had instructions, Abraham had a burning bush, etc. It became increasingly more complicated.

3. After Sinai, these problems disappear. Yahweh begins to write and needs a translator. Thus, it goes from God to Moses, Moses to Aaron, Aaron to the people, a validation of the oral giving of the Law.
 4. Stone can survive the death of a prophet, by such a permanent code might need to be read and interpreted, thus creating a need for priests. This is one way to view the elaborateness of the second half of *Exodus*.
- D. Recall that Moses came down from the mountain and put up an altar with twelve pillars. In chapter 24 of *Exodus*, we see that he puts down the words of the Law. He reads it (the "Decalogue") to the people and they acknowledge it. This marks a transitional stage: he writes, but they hear the oral transmission.
1. Then God calls Moses back for the tablets. This is another theophany (a manifestation of God or a deity). These new laws are focused on the settled state, whereas the earlier Decalogue apply more to a mostly rural, agrarian society.
 2. The appearance of the Ark of the Covenant gives the people something approaching a shrine, yet they are proscribed from making graven images of God. So they are between no settled habitation or God on the one hand, and the temple and settled beliefs on the other.
 3. Moses comes down to see people worshipping the golden calf and he throws down the stone tablets. Yahweh invites him back for (presumably other?) tablets. This reminds us that the Law can be lost, that it must be cared for, thus indicating the importance of the priesthood. There are parallels in U.S. history with the creation of the Constitution and the creation of laws and their review by the judiciary.
- E. There is real drama here in the formation of the Law and the priesthood.
1. The first obvious thing is who is allowed to go up the hill and see God and who isn't? The priests are not supposed to go up.
 2. The implied question is: can you really see God? Yahweh wants his people to smash idols and images, and his name is to be a secret, not to be uttered.
 3. But there is an anthropomorphic presence. The real epiphany (or vision) is only a voice, such as that coming from the burning bush. Such scenes suggest that actually seeing God would be fatal to mankind.
 4. The passing from God to humans of the Law (its letter and spirit) is part of the action of this drama. In the Ark of the Covenant, we see two possibilities or explanations: in *Deuteronomy*, the Ark is a wooden chest for the tablets; in *Exodus*, it is a portable throne for

God. When the Temple was destroyed, both the Ark and the tablets were lost.

5. Thus, the priest interprets, the writer interprets. The book itself becomes the abode of the Lord.

Essential Reading:

Exodus, in toto.

Supplementary Reading:

Prickett, Chap. 4.

Carmichael, *in toto*.

Questions to Consider:

1. Compare and contrast Moses with Gilgamesh. With Oedipus. Your analysis should include both the religious roles of each person as well as other considerations, such as political leadership and impact on the future developments of their respective peoples.
2. What did Yahweh mean when He said to Moses, "I am, that am."?

Lecture Four

Job and the Problem of Evil

Scope: Why *do* bad things happen to good people? This problem (that of theodicy) which is both timeless and insoluble has vexed religious thinkers for centuries. Addressing the problem of evil, the *Book of Job* offers a philosophy of resignation. Such a doctrine posits that God is inscrutable but necessarily just and that His ways can never be justified to mankind. The *Book of Job* counsels humility and faith in the face of what appears to be moral chaos. This is the greatest single contribution of a religious symbol to Western civilization.

Outline

- I. The problem of evil is one without an obvious solution in the monotheistic tradition.
 - A. In polytheistic religions, blame is easier to assign, since gods are not omniscient or omnipotent. Thus, when evil occurs, it is because someone was doing something evil when a god (or even the head god) wasn't looking.
 - B. In the monotheistic religions, the "buck stops with God." Since God is all-good and all-perfect, how could He tolerate evil and suffering to afflict those whom He created and presumably loves?
 - C. The Book of Job in the Hebrew Bible explicitly asks this question about evil in parable form. Although it has been redacted over the centuries, the story is fairly smooth, it is elegant simplicity, and yet at the same time an altogether bewildering and intriguing story.
- II. Satan convinces God to test the faith of Job by afflicting him with a series of maladies.
 - A. The first chapter gives the narrative frame; Yahweh and Satan are in a place, which is not described or specified. Satan is perhaps not, at this point, the ultimate in evil.
 - B. As for the other main character, Job, Yahweh likes him; he is a faithful servant, but not yet the figure of absolute resignation that we will see him gradually become.
 1. Job is wealthy, but since there is no money in his world, we know that this is an old, old story.
 2. Because he is faithful to God, he is prosperous and happy.
 3. Satan tells God that Job's faithfulness is a fraud, that he really doesn't like God and that without his rich flocks, he wouldn't be pious.

4. God tells Satan to go down and test Job, and from his outside behavior to explore the inner core of the man.
- C. In a sense, Satan is doing God's will here, even though it seems like a wager between him and Yahweh.
 1. He kills Job's flocks and even his children, yet Job does not blaspheme or blame God.
 2. His wife tells him to curse God and die; she is the paragon of the faithless. But Job says that he will never curse God.
- III. The plot thickens. Job's sufferings escalate and three friends of Job and the mysterious Elihu debate Job's wretched condition from a theological perspective.
 - A. At this juncture, Satan tells God that Job is just going through the motions and that he must strike Job physically. God accepts the proposition and Job breaks out in boils and sores, yet remains faithful.
 - B. We are at an impasse here. Satan, in effect, is the apostle of futility since he can't win the 'bet' anyway. We might consider him to be a Miltonic, Promethean Satan.
 - C. Enter Job's three friends. All are would-be theologians and believe that they can see God's hidden purposes.
 1. They commiserate with Job, but are not always truly sympathetic.
 2. Their agenda is to justify God's ways and to justify themselves. Since they are not personally afflicted, they are virtuous. There is a powerful element of human pride at work here.
 3. Remember also that three is a heavenly number, moving toward some final revelation. There are three possibilities: (a) Job has sinned and is lying when he says he swears that he hasn't; (b) his family has committed some secret sin and his individual guilt is tied to the collective guilt (this echoes the transgression of Adam and the collective guilt of the Original Sin); or, finally, (c) Job has somehow unknowingly transgressed against God.
 4. Job rejects all the arguments and says that his interlocutors are not morally equipped to accuse him; judgement is the province of God.
 5. This is a philosophy of resignation, which is based on the concept that the world is basically mysterious and inscrutable. This is the exact opposite of the Greek concept of the world as rational. Given the Hebrew belief in the mystery of the world, resignation is a virtue; to the Greeks, it is a vice.
 - D. At the end of the colloquies with the three so-called friends (and interestingly, the third friend doesn't speak, probably indicating a corruption in the text), we meet Elihu, a young man of moral wisdom.

1. He has remained silent and has listened as the three friends have held forth against Job. He is provoked by them and regards them as blasphemous.
2. He reproves Job and says that if he is virtuous, he must accept the hand God has dealt with absolute resignation.
3. Thus, he is not to shake his fist at God; there is no Promethean gesture permitted.
4. Elihu continues in this vein by saying you can't judge Yahweh. While Job appears to be a faithful servant, in fact he is proud of his status and is self-congratulatory. This is akin to the Greek idea of hubris.

E. Job probably comes out of another tradition, perhaps that of Mesopotamian wisdom literature. However, Elihu is a Hebrew redaction of the story.

1. We need "Elihu ex machina" here. If Job is not justified, then God must be.
2. There is a rift between external actions and the internal facts of the soul; Job has hubris to think that he can advise God.
3. There are two stances a faithful person can take: agree with Yahweh or disagree with Yahweh. In either case, you cannot presume to judge God. God must be separate from you.

IV. Yahweh comes to Job and calls for absolute submission.

- A. God appears in the form of a tornado, awesome and dynamic, a symbol of moral chaos.
 1. This is the Yahweh of the Hebrew Bible: the severe judge, the intimidator, universal lawgiver, inscrutable force, utterly apart from humanity.
 2. If you get too close to the divine image, you will die.
- B. Job is sore afflicted and God, speaking from the tornado, asks him where he was when the world was created (again the human-divine gulf). The message:
 1. If you believe in Yahweh, everything happens for a providential reason.
 2. There must be a distinction between right and wrong.
 3. Mankind can never really fulfil the covenant, because it is sinful and depraved due to Original Sin.
 4. When bad things happen to us, we deserve it.
- C. Job intends to force us into a radical position of faith, which the Greeks would find fanatical.
 1. We can throw off the burden of justifying ourselves in God's eyes, since he already knows our moral status.

2. So perhaps Satan was partly right when he said that Job followed God because of the good He provided. Satan says Job is "heteronomous" (i.e., subject to another's laws or rules, from the root *nomos*, the Greek word for 'law'), but that Yahweh must be followed, no matter what he dishes out.

D. So the question remains: why is there evil? The answer: Yahweh knows and if He wants to tell us, He will.

1. Our proper position is therefore absolute submission to God's will. This is like Pascal or Kierkegaard, two recapitulators of the Job story, the problem of theodicy, of good and evil.
2. Yahweh insists on two ideas: God is moral, but we can never completely understand how this moral law is achieved.
3. The philosophy of resignation found in the Job story is the greatest religious symbol introduced by the Hebrew Bible into Western civilization.

Essential Reading:

The Book of Job, in toto.

Supplementary Reading:

Glatzer, Chap. 5-6.
Wilcox, *in toto*

Questions to Consider:

1. Is the *Book of Job* anti-theological? Support your position.
2. Compare and contrast the images of Yahweh as whirlwind in *Job* and as burning bush in *Exodus*.

Lecture Five

Isaiah: Swords into Plowshares

Scope: The *Book of Isaiah* is divided into three parts, composed over the course of some 200 years. Concerned with the problems, both political and religious, created by the close proximity of Mesopotamia and Egypt, *Isaiah* aims to curtail the spread of syncretistic religious practices and call the people back to the original terms of the Covenant. The theme of Jerusalem as a sacred city is further developed and connected with sacred history.

Outline

- I. The prophets were the chosen men of a chosen people, the Israelites, whose history we will briefly recapitulate.
 - A. The "Chosen People" of Israel began as small group, harassed over land and sea. The Hebrews were caught between two great civilizations, Egypt and Mesopotamia. This vulnerability affected their politics and theology.
 - B. The Hebrews were freed from bondage by the Egyptian pharaoh in around 1250 B.C. and for approximately two hundred years they wandered in exile (or exodus), finally settling in the "Promised Land."
 1. There followed a period of rule by judges, notably not by princes or kings.
 2. They are the people of the Book, of the Law. After Sinai, they need people to interpret the Law. Thus, theirs is a sacred history.
 - C. After this period, the people approach the judges and demand a king. So the kings are anointed, notably David and Solomon. The latter dies about 924 B.C. and the nation splits into two halves: in the north, Israel; in the south, Judah.
 - D. In their wide-ranging conquests, which take them eventually as far as Egypt, the Assyrians conquer the northern kingdom in the 8th century B.C. The Babylonians conquer them a century later and destroy Jerusalem. The Jewish people are taken into captivity to Babylon, but retain their identity through the Law.
 - E. We now turn to consider the role of prophets in the Hebrew tradition.
 1. Prophets were common in the ancient world, not just among the Hebrews. However, a Hebrew prophet was considered the chosen man of the chosen people.
 2. A prophet called for repentance and viewed current events in the light of human depravity.

3. Their message: Yahweh punishes his people for their wicked, sinful ways. Since there is always sin, there is always room for prophecy. Catastrophic or events such as earthquakes, invasion, famine, etc. can be explained.
 - D. Along with the tradition of prophets is one of false prophets. Most prophets did not make it into the biblical canon.
 1. From the 8th to the 6th century B.C., Israel is a playground for invading armies. The great prophets of this period are Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel.
 2. Why are there so many invasions? The prophets answer that it is due to the wickedness of the people, their falling away from the terms of the Covenant. They have a way out of the labyrinth, a guide to returning to the Covenant.
 3. The persistent pattern of the history of the people of Yahweh is adherence to the Covenant, then a falling away from it, then punishment, then redemption through a prophet.
- II. Isaiah is a book of many authors and many interpolations.
 - A. The text of Isaiah was written over two or perhaps even three authors and later redacted. It resembles a patchwork quilt, with many interpolations within it. Most biblical books are like this.
 - B. There are three main parts to the book. I Isaiah is by the 8th century B.C. prophet Isaiah; III Isaiah is about two hundred years later, after the exile. By chapter, the contributions are: 1-39 (8th century, B.C.), 40-55 (6th century B.C.), 56-66 (5th century B.C.).
 - III. Isaiah is full of rich and complex themes and symbolism. This book of the Old Testament is sometimes known as the "fifth Gospel" because of its prophecies of Jesus, the Messiah.
 - A. The first theme is that of moral universality, that is, one rule for everyone, not just a select few.
 1. Monotheism yearns for universality, the *axis mundi*. Israel has something that will make other powers pale by comparison, the idea of a universal law.
 2. Israel also has something else: a linear view of history, run by Yahweh, as opposed to the circular view in archaic cultures. Not only does God run history, but his law is universal, a moral beacon for "the city on the hill."
 - B. There are many other themes which we will see later in Western civilization:
 1. Resignation as philosophy: Isaiah echoes this theme from Job

2. Providence: God plans all and we can see patterns in this, from captivity to restoration, and a repeat of the exodus (Egypt and Babylon).
3. Soteriology: this means the working out of the divine salvation of humanity. Specifically, it involves the messianic vision, that the people of God will be released when God sends a redeemer. This acknowledges the role of Jerusalem as the "city on the hill," closely linked to the messiah and the salvation of mankind.
4. Peace: this involves more than a religious sentiment. It is also a matter of practical politics for a people caught, as Israel was, between larger and aggressive neighbors. The yearning for eschatology (the ways to approach the end of life).

C. Most of the stories are multi-layered in Isaiah.

1. God's plan is so unique and detailed that not only are the Assyrians his instrument, but each chastisement becomes a revelation. The Chosen People find out more about themselves after each ordeal. Thus we see the process of moral search.
2. Some passages not written in the 8th century B.C. were inserted later to make the story more continuous. This seems to be the case with chapters 13 and 14. The apocalyptic parts of I Isaiah, chapters 24-27, may be post-exilic. This is not one continuous narrative.

IV. Isaiah unfolds in three distinct parts.

- A. The first part of Isaiah deals with the problem of syncretism, that is, the idea of merging different traditions, beliefs, gods, etc. into the Hebrew culture. There are some examples of syncretism in the Bible.
 1. In Proverbs, wisdom is referred to as a woman; this is perhaps a hold-over from ancient goddess traditions
 2. In Samuel I, the people say they want a king. This political concept is borrowed from other people. Such borrowing is not always bad.
 3. However, this Isaiah is dead-set against syncretism. He says Yahweh is angry about this and abjures the Israelites to avoid the Assyrian conquerors.
 4. The Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. is a turning point.
- B. The second part of Isaiah is set against the destruction of the sacred city. Why has this happened? The prophet states that it is due to the sinfulness of the people. They need redemption but only after to returning to monotheism.
 1. Thus, redemption is not an event, but a process.

2. We should also note at this juncture that Genesis and Exodus are not really monotheistic texts. This doesn't happen until Isaiah. When the earlier books were created, the alternative deities of the polytheistic Near East were still in the background. But with Isaiah, monotheism reigns supreme for Israel: "I am the Lord and there is no other!"

V. Jerusalem, whether real or symbolic, fully emerges in Isaiah as a sacred city.

- A. Rebuilding Jerusalem became the new project of the Jewish people. Whereas Jerusalem was once a geographical center, now it became a symbolic locus.
- B. The evil city of Babylon is the mirror image of Jerusalem, and becomes a byword for corruption and evil. This symbol of a depraved city will be important in the Greek Testament and the Koran. Babylon will translate eventually to Rome.
- C. This jump from the physical to spiritual city is of greatest significance. The capture and destruction of the city of Jerusalem actually proved that Jerusalem was indestructible and that the Promised Land can really be anywhere, as long as one is obeying God's Law.
- D. Collectivity is transformed by an exodus to the "new" city, which is really the same old city, but now better understood.
 1. Its chastisement can be understood as part of the universal law, and the city serves as a beacon to the world.
 2. Subsequent Western religion can be seen a global rebuilding of Jerusalem, a universe in itself. One literary parallel is St. Augustine's *City of God*.

Essential Reading:

The Book of Isaiah, in toto.

Supplementary Reading:

Heschel, Chap. 4, 8.
Williamson, *in toto*.

Questions to Consider:

1. How did the historical contexts of first, second and third sections of *Isaiah* differ? What significance does this have for the theme(s) of each?
2. Is *Isaiah* a messianic text? Support your position by referring to specific chapters and verses.

Lecture Six

Matthew: The New Law

Scope: In this lecture, we move to the New Testament, or the Christian Gospel. We will consider first the *Gospel According to Matthew* maintains the closest connection with Christianity's Jewish roots. Presenting Jesus as a new Moses, a new Law is unveiled in the form of the Sermon on the Mount. *Matthew's* five parts articulate the domain of Christian morality and are analogous to the five books of the Pentateuch. Paramount to Christian morality is the "Golden Rule," stated in Matthew 7:12.

Outline

I. The three synoptic Gospels are so called because they are partly derived one from the other. Despite the commonalities, there are distinguishing characteristics to each. We must first consider Matthew in relation to the other two gospels from which it draws.

A. Matthew contains about ninety percent of the material in the *Gospel According to Mark*, which was written about 75 A.D.

1. Mark is the shortest of all the gospels and contains a bare-bones account of the life of Jesus. Its main concern is on the end, or eschatology.
2. It was written in an apocalyptic age, immediately following the Roman destruction of the Temple at Jerusalem in 70 A.D.
3. Matthew has in common about fifty percent of the contents of Luke.

B. Matthew is about the ethic of Christianity, contained primarily in the moving account of the Sermon on the Mount. Luke, in 85 A.D., refers to the domain of Christianity, making it universal.

C. Five parables are common to all three Gospels: good and bad soil (for the nurture of faith as contained in the Word of God); faith as a mustard seed; the evil vineyard tenants; a house divided; the eschatological fig tree.

II. We must examine the sources, intent and main themes in Matthew.

A. Matthew was intended for those in the Jewish community who hadn't accepted the Christian message. It is the Gospel most connected to the oral traditions of the Hebrew Bible.

B. These oral traditions are very important. Scholars have given them names: L and M for those in Luke and Matthew, respectively. Another is called the Q source.

1. Luke and Matthew have two hundred and thirty (230) verses in common that are not found in Mark.
2. The overlaps seem to be verbatim, suggesting the possibility of an earlier source, a stripped-down version of the Gospels. This is the hypothetical Q source, the precursor of all the synoptic Gospels.

III. The main themes of Matthew include sacrifice, moral perfection, and Christian eschatology.

A. As noted, the audience is believing Jews and we find several dozen quotations that can be seen as fulfillment of prophecies in the Hebrew Bible.

1. Matthew adds a genealogy of Jesus that is not found in Mark.
2. This goes all the way back to Abraham, the source of the Covenant with God, showing continuity (cf. to Lecture 2- Genesis, where we noted the emphasis in the Hebrew Bible on species, like things reproducing themselves).
3. The genealogy goes through the House of David. This is very important, since it establishes Jesus as a Jew.

B. Matthew retains the Mosaic Law and establishes Jesus as the last in line of God's revelations and an extension of Mosaic Law.

1. Sacrifice imagery is continued in Matthew, with Jesus taking it to the ultimate degree. In the Hebrew Bible, there are continual sacrifices. Yahweh required the best of the flock, physically spotless.
2. Jesus ups the ante and radicalizes this: it is the morally perfect man who must be sacrificed now.
3. Thus we move from cyclical and repetitive to unique. Of all the sons of Adam, the best who ever lived was Jesus, our icon of moral perfection and the only one fit for sacrifice in the eyes of God. We must sacrifice our worldly life for the rebirth into a new self.
4. The Church becomes the new "chosen people." The Church is the new Israel and Jesus is the new sacrificial lamb. This sacrificial imagery underscores the great amount of eschatology in Mark, the expectation of the world's end (remember the trauma of the destruction of the Temple).

IV. Matthew, open to various structural readings, places a heavy reliance on parables.

A. It is very important to read the Scriptures carefully, since there are a variety of structural possibilities to consider.

1. We can see Matthew's Gospel as the new Pentateuch. Thus, Jesus is the new Moses, leading the Church on a path to salvation. The five parts are: (a) the beginning of the ministry and then the

Sermon on the Mount; (b) Jesus on missionary discourse; (3) parables on the Kingdom of God; (d) teachings on the Church and discipleship; and finally (e) Jerusalem and the Temple.

2. A related system of images holds this Gospel together. The account is bounded by the Nativity and the Passion, which is what makes this "Pentateuch" new, and what makes this the new Law, not just an amendment of the old Law.

B. Matthew presents powerful imagery in parables, such as those of the unforgiving servant, the generous employer, the two sons, the lack of a wedding garment, and others that have inspired future writers and painters.

1. The last two we read in Matthew are very important. The parable of the wise and foolish maidens tells us that half of the group did not have oil for their lamps, while the other half did, and thus were able to light their lamps and attend to the bridegroom when he appeared.
2. The other parable is that of the sheep and the goats. The sheep become the flock (the chosen), while the goats are the children of the devil.

V. Matthew gives us an intriguing picture of Jesus and advances the idea of the Trinity.

A. The shortest verse in the Bible is "Jesus wept." What sort of a God cries? Why would God cry?

1. In all the Platonic dialogues, Socrates never cries, even at his impending death, though he laughs twice.
2. In all the Gospels, even the so-called Gnostic Gospels (not part of the canon), there is no record of Jesus laughing. Perhaps the gulf between human and divine is too great.
3. God can forgive, but this does not undo his universal moral law. This presents a sympathetic face of God.

B. The conclusion of Matthew is the first Trinitarian verse in the Gospels.

1. This presents somewhat of an enigma. Ever since Gilgamesh, the pantheon of Mesopotamian deities is a collection of nature spirits; that is the background of the Bible and it took many centuries to modify this.
2. By the end of the Hebrew Bible, we clearly have monotheism (cf. Lecture 5 on Isaiah, where this became firmly entrenched).
3. So the question is: why break Yahweh up into three parts after coalescing and abolishing the polytheistic deities? Jesus represents not just a change in God, but how we think about God.
4. The Old Testament God is utterly intimidating. But that is not sufficient (cf. the Biblical verse, *The Song of Solomon*). Jesus

shows a new way of thinking; He knows fear, pain, he is like us. We deserve what we get, but not Him. In this context, humans can more easily assimilate God into their lives.

5. As for the Holy Spirit, the suffering Jesus is too corporeal. The Spirit is the final revelation, God in the form of an idea. Thus, the conclusion of Matthew is important because the Trinity is one of the most important vehicles for giving access to the psyche in relation to God.

Essential Reading:

The Gospel According to Matthew, in toto

Supplementary Reading:

Meier, *in toto*

Riley, Chap. 2-3.

Questions to Consider:

1. What is the meaning of the Sermon on the Mount? Can you think of any echoes of this in later Western literature?
2. Compare and contrast Jesus and Moses. What merit is there in the claim that Matthew's Gospel is a new Pentateuch?

Lecture Seven

Luke and Acts: From Jerusalem to Rome

Scope: The *Gospel According to Luke* and the *Acts of the Apostles*, comprising more than a quarter of the New Testament, were written by the same author. Forging a connection between the words of Jesus and the events of the early Church, these books (especially *Luke*) are primarily directed towards the Hellenized cultures of the Mediterranean basin. The movement from *Luke* to *Acts* parallels the transition from the sacred city of Jerusalem to the profane city of Rome, mimicking the change of Christianity from a heretical Jewish sect to a Mediterranean savior religion.

Outline

- I. Together, *Luke* and *Acts* describe the history of the early Church.
 - A. Both books have the same anonymous author, and it is common practice to treat them as a continuous whole. Taken together, they provide a revealing picture of the early Church. Thus, Christianity is one of the few world religions to have such a history book built into its scripture or holy writings.
 - B. The author was probably a Hellenistic Jew who probably wrote it down around 85 A.D. Mark is one source, as was the Q document and oral tradition. Approximately one-third of *Luke* is unique to it. Also, occasionally, the author lapses into the first person.
 - C. It is interesting to note the conception of the early Church on the Gospels. The Church Father Augustine of Hippo (354 - 430 A.D.) believed that the order of the Gospels was the order in which they were written. Modern scholarship suggests that *Mark* was first.
 - D. *Luke* is the gospel of the gentiles, those raised outside the tradition of the Hebrew Bible's monotheism. This is evident by its few references to Scripture.
 1. *Luke* is offering a message that is universally accessible.
 2. The historical framing of these works can heighten our understanding of them. Such knowledge is not blasphemous, but beneficial.
- II. *Luke* concentrates on Jesus as a divine agent, while *Acts* emphasizes the role of the disciples and early martyrs.
 - A. *Luke's* main theme is history, and Jesus is the great turning point in the history of the world, the divine agent of universal salvation.

1. There is an emphasis on love for the outcast in *Luke*, and he offers concrete examples of miracles, which emphasize Christ's humanity.
 2. In *Acts*, at the Pentecost, the Spirit descends on the Apostles. They acquire polyglossia, the ability to speak and understand all tongues. This symbolizes the universality of Christianity.
 3. The Pentecostal experience is the founding event in the Christian Church and has its parallel in *Genesis* (the Spirit infusing the void with life).
- B. The *Acts of the Apostles* also discusses the early martyrs of the Church and also the journeys of Paul.
 1. This underscores an important theme, that of the change from a Jewish sect to a faith community destined to become a world historical religion.
 2. Acts ends with Paul in Rome awaiting his martyrdom. This is a departure from earlier Christian eschatology. Christ had been dead for more than a century and the world hadn't ended.

III. *Luke* broadens the story of the prophets and the Chosen People.

- A. Jesus is a prophet, but Israel has been universalized. Thus, Jesus is the greatest of the prophets.
 1. *Luke* is the only Gospel to describe Jesus as a "savior."
 2. In *Luke*, heaven and earth are synchronized around Jesus. The Nativity narrative emphasizes the star. The Magi follow the star, thus wisdom is synchronized with the birth of Christ.
 3. The Romans are providentially moved to conduct the census. Even the slaughter of the infant boys by Herod is providential, forcing Mary and Joseph to flee to Egypt, recalling the story of the Old Testament Joseph. The key idea is that all is providential, confirmed, unified, synchronized.
- B. There is a proselytizing purpose here. The writer of *Luke* is conscious of his audience, yet wants to make his account applicable to all.
 1. For example, *Luke* omits the story of the worship of the Syrophoenician woman; an act of faith included in *Mark*, because it might be off-putting to a Greek audience not looking for that kind of commitment.
 2. Genealogy is different too. Recall that *Matthew* traced Jesus from Abraham through David to show continuity and legitimacy. But *Luke* goes all the way back to Adam, ultimately. Thus, Jesus is human, part of the family tree of all people.
 3. Both Adam and Jesus are described as a son of God. Second son imagery is very important in the Bible; the second son often does

better than the first son. In this sense, Jesus and his Church are supplanting Jewish tradition; He is a second son, in a sense.

- C. In terms of structure, *Luke* is "standard" in relation to the synoptic accounts.
1. The narrative starts with the Nativity and proceeds as follows: infancy, baptism and temptation, gathering of disciples, journey to Jerusalem (reprise of the Exodus), Temple and money-changers, Passion, death and Resurrection.
 2. There are some unique parables in *Luke*: the Good Samaritan with its universalizing moral; the Prodigal Son, with its parallels with the Chosen People; the Pharisee and Publican (former performs rituals, while latter admits to sinfulness).

IV. *Acts* recounts the history of the transfer of power from Jerusalem to Rome.

- A. The Christian message is spreading during the period of the *Act*, and seems to be overcoming all obstacles. However, in Athens, jaded intellectuals are not impressed by Paul's message; they have seen numerous savior religions. This symbolizes the gulf between Athens and Jerusalem (important because Athens is also one of the great sources of Western civilization).
- B. Paul then returns to Jerusalem, where he is arrested by Roman authorities and sent to Rome. The book ends with him in prison, awaiting martyrdom. Even with his death, the growing Church cannot be stopped.
- C. If *Luke* is indeed the last of the synoptic Gospels, it is written in about 85-90 A.D.
1. Eschatology is important, even though the world has not ended. This is a fruitful ambiguity: we're not sure when the world will end (in other words, it is not apocalyptic, like *Mark*; cf. Lecture 6).
 2. The Church is coming to terms with the fact that the end of the world is not imminent. So it takes the early acts of the Church and canonizes them. Thus, we can view the death of St. Stephen as a recapitulation of the death of Jesus.
- D. While history does synchronize around Christ, that doesn't mean that the end is imminent. The *Acts of the Apostles* thus is a foundational history work for the Church, in which Christianity moves from a local heresy of Judaism to the status of a world (albeit at the moment Mediterranean) religion.

Essential Reading:

The Gospel According to Luke, in toto
The Acts of the Apostles, in toto.

Supplementary Reading:

Brawley, Chap. 1-3.
Green, *in toto*.

Questions to Consider:

1. Summarize the main symbolic elements in Luke's account of Jesus' nativity.
2. How does *Acts* describe the main events during Paul's stay in Athens? What significance for the further development of Western civilization can you derive from the apparent tension between the intellectual tradition of Athens and that of Jerusalem reflected in the Pauline journey to Greece?

Lecture Eight

John: The Unbroken Net of Scripture

Scope: *John* is the most mystical of the Gospels, emphasizing miracles over parables and containing a plethora of numerical symbolism. Unlike the Synoptic Gospels, *John* treats the crucifixion as glorifying Jesus rather than humiliating Him. Serving as the source for many dogmas upon which are based many later Christian creeds, *John* is uniquely important despite its non-synoptic nature.

Outline

- I. *John* stands apart from the Synoptic Gospels in its abstract character.
 - A. Written around 90 A.D., *John* is clearly the most spiritual and difficult of the Gospels. It presents a mystical side of Jesus. It exerted an influence on Gnostic Christianity (a sect which based its belief on esoteric knowledge which its adherents claimed was revealed uniquely to them).
 - B. *John* is both a synopsis of Bible stories and a self-conscious unification of them.
 1. Sources of *John* include the Q document, oral tradition and of course the Synoptic Gospels themselves. But it is also based on something called the "Signs Gospel," which is hypothetical, but about which we have some indirect knowledge.
 2. It is a record of Jesus' doings as opposed to His sayings. At any rate, *John* tries to emphasize the divinity of Jesus by stressing miracles as opposed to parables. There is no continuous narrative of what Jesus does, unlike in the Synoptic Gospels.
- II. *John* synthesizes the gospels without diminishing them.
 - A. From *Mark*, *John* borrows eschatology, but with the difference that the end is no longer imminent, but continuous
 - B. From *Matthew*, *John* takes the continuity between Jesus and the Jewish tradition; it is full of "I am" statements by Jesus which harkens back to Yahweh's "I am" that Moses hears at Sinai.
 - C. From *Luke*, *John* takes the universality of the Covenant, moving from the old to the new Chosen People. *John* is clearly the triumph of the Spirit: *Logos* is the light of the world.

III. The symbolism of *John* is fraught with numerology.

- A. *John* is generally acknowledged as being the most difficult and recondite of the Gospels. Again, this is partly due to its stress on Jesus as *Logos*, the divine word or spirit. We can draw a connection here to the Pentecostal experience and panglossia.
- B. *John* replaces parables with numbers. This should not be surprising in the Mediterranean world where mathematics and magic are the same. Thus, we find a network of numerical symbols in *John* that we don't find in the other Gospels. Things may be hidden by numbers, but they are meant for our discovery.
 1. One is God, two is society (Adam and Eve), three is heaven (the Trinity), four is the Earth (four cardinal points of the compass), five is man (arms, legs, head), six is evil (incompleteness, corruption), seven is perfection (Heaven and Earth), twelve is harmony (tribes, Apostles), forty is completion (years or days in the desert).
 2. Other examples include: feeding 5,000 people with five loaves and two fishes; Lazarus' four days in tomb vs. Jesus' three days (the former is an earthly number, indicative of mortality, while the latter is heavenly, indicating the Resurrection and eternal life); the number "153" (referring to fishes) in John 21 (this is the only reference to this number in the Bible).
 3. Another aspect of numerology is the number of times something happens. There are six big signs before Jesus' death, each preceded by an "I am" statement. Recall that six indicates corruption and incompleteness; the world is thus corrupt before the death and Resurrection of Jesus. *John* gives us the seventh sign in the last chapter, and it is the reference to 153 fishes.

IV. The structure of *John* also differs from that of the other gospels.

- A. The Gospel begins with a hymnic prologue containing the sacred names of God.
 1. Jesus is called "the Word," "Son of Man," "Son of God," "the Christ," and so forth.
 2. What is the "Son of Man" exactly? Perhaps it refers to the perfect human being, perhaps to the only human to realize his full potential. This might imply that we are not quite human (being imperfect).
- B. In *John*, Jesus meets considerable opposition. What connects the early part of *John* to the eventual Passion is the idea of the Word made flesh. Throughout, we hear the characteristic "I am" statements.
- C. Finally, God's glory is revealed in *John*, something we don't see in the other Gospels. In *John*, the Passion is the high point, the turning point

in the human world. John avoids the ghastliness of the Synoptic Gospels and takes this event to a new level.

D. There is a kind of Gnostic postscript, a second conclusion (Chapter 21). This passage is full of symbolism.

1. The disciples see Christ resurrected. He tells them to throw the net out, after they have failed to catch any fish. They catch more than they can hold.
2. This passage is often interpreted as a symbol for missionary effort, but we can also see Peter's net as a metasymbol, referring back to the whole Gospel tradition, offering an unbroken net of images and metaphors containing the spiritual food of life without breaking.

V. Interpreting John requires considerable finesse at reading symbols.

A. Let's return to the symbolic number of 153 fishes. What is the meaning?

1. First, the fish is the symbol of Jesus; some scholars believe that this derives from a Pythagorean tradition.
2. There is also triadic symbolism here, drawing us to the Trinity.
3. Animal, vegetable, mineral are usual categories in the ancient world. In the Gospels, Jesus is represented as each: he is the "cornerstone" in *Luke* and is elsewhere described as the vine and the Lamb of God. So he is all three in one.
4. Liquids are another symbol: in Exodus, water comes from a rock. Connected with the idea of a vine is, of course, wine, thus bringing to mind the Last Supper and the blood of the sacrificial Lamb of God. Christ changes water into wine, later wine into blood.

B. The temptations of Jesus are also triadic, as are the virtues of faith, hope and charity. There are also three "ages" of the Biblical tradition: Israel, Christ, the Church.

1. If the symbol "153" is taken as triadic, there is good reason to believe that the Bible is a perfect unbroken set of metaphors (cf. to the unbroken net of Peter).
2. The only miracle found in all four Gospels is the feeding of the 5,000 people with the loaves and fishes. This infinitude means that the "net is filled."
3. Symbolically, then, the Scriptures offer access to an infinite amount of spiritual life.

Essential Reading:

The Gospel According to John, in toto.

Supplementary Reading:

Ashton, Chap. 1-2.

Brodie, *in toto*.

Questions to Consider:

1. What is the importance of Jesus' "I am" sayings in the *Gospel According to John*?
2. What themes hold *John* together? How important do you think is the numerology evident in this Gospel account? In the *Book of Revelation* (covered in Lecture 10), written about 95 A.D.?

Lecture Nine

The Pauline Tradition

Scope: After Jesus himself, Paul is the most important figure in the history of Christianity. His missionary work transformed Christianity into a world historical religion and his glosses on the Christian message have been taken as canonical by later generations. Both ascetic and cosmopolitan, Paul's outlook helped extend Christianity throughout the Roman Empire, his epistles to embryonic churches, many of which he established, serving to establish the parameters of Christian life. This lecture will provide background on Paul and his writings and provide analysis of the most significant of his epistles.

Outline

- I. Paul is the most important New Testament figure after Jesus.
 - A. Paul (or Saul of Tarsus, in Asia Minor) was a Hellenized Jew and Roman citizen who studied Jewish Law under a rabbi. He was extremely devout and even in his conversion experience he did not give up on the idea of a universal moral law.
 1. He is the single most important interpreter of doctrine in this early phase of Church development. His early journeys happened about 50 A.D. making him roughly contemporary with Jesus.
 2. He actually was a persecutor of early Christians. On a trip to Damascus, he feels the overwhelming presence of God and is blinded by a bright flash. His sight is restored when he becomes a believer.
 3. He has other epiphanies, such as that Jesus is the Son of God. This begins his *imitatio Christi*, and his transmission of the "good news."
 - B. He undertakes three missionary journeys, traveling from city to city, following trade routes.
 1. As he proselytizes, he forms churches and gives them rules.
 2. His many epistles to the churches try to resolve doctrinal disputes and do not really form a coherent narrative.
 3. Paul's epistles are important historical documents about the early Church.
 4. Finally, he is arrested, condemned and executed by command of the Emperor Nero. His removal from Jerusalem to the "new Babylon" of Rome has important symbolism. It is not unlike

Augustine's City of God (in this case, Jerusalem) and corrupt City of Man (here, Babylon transferred to Rome).

5. Paul's career is a poetic story and he endures as an icon of religious fidelity.

II. Why were the Romans so opposed to Christianity?

- A. At the first level, they took it to be another mystery cult, or a group of rabble-rousers that didn't conform to the orderly Roman way. But there were other reasons for the strength of Roman opposition to this new religion.
 1. First, the Christian notion of moral freedom that equated the master and slave was contrary to Roman belief.
 2. The notions of faith, hope and charity were not Roman notions.
 3. Christian eschatology (end of things) appealed strongly to the dispossessed. Many would be willing to risk martyrdom because they believed that the end of the world was at hand. This was disturbing to the Romans, to whom the deification of the Emperor was the power rite of the Empire. They weren't interested in the passing away of temporal power. Rome personified this worldly emphasis, the "new Babylon."
- B. Returning to the master-slave relationship, such occurrences as the slave rebellion of Spartacus had to be ruthlessly crushed by the Romans to cow others and keep order. But the peaceful Christian "rebellion" where death was not to be feared was hard for the Romans to deal with.
- C. The mores of the Romans were extraordinarily different from those of the Christians, who comprised on 1% of the population of the Roman Empire in 100 A.D. Even by 384 A.D., Christianity was only between 12% and 15% of the total population. The new religion has a long, long struggle ahead of it, against great odds.
 1. Pliny called Christianity a "depraved superstition."
 2. The Romans were horrified by the idea of eating "flesh" (the Body of Christ in the Eucharist), which they equated with cannibalism.
 3. Early churches also identified Jesus with other traditions, such as those of Dionysus, god of the vine. This suggested orgies.
 4. Again, the appeal of Christianity to the underclass, always a source of grumbling and potential challenge to the political status quo, was seen as dangerous by the Romans.

III. The Pauline epistles convey the practical missionary work of Paul. We will discuss the individual epistles after reviewing some general background.

- A. Seven of the epistles are taken to be genuine by scholars.

1. Paul was creating churches in a somewhat *ad hoc* manner. His writing is often ambiguous, as he seeks a practical level of harmony.
2. Indeed, it is his practicality that distinguishes him of all the New Testament writers; he is very unlike the ethereal John. A charitable reading of Paul considers all these factors.
- B. Paul presents a universal Covenant, a carry-over from Abraham and a pre-figurement of what we see in Luke. As in *Matthew*, there is a fulfillment of the Scriptures, a continuity between the Old and New Covenant as history moves towards the *eschaton*, or end of the world.
- C. As for sources, Paul is, as it were, flying blind, with oral traditions but not the Gospels. He knew the Hebrew Bible, may have known the author of the Q document and certainly knew the earliest figures of the Church. His theology has a certain tension to it.
- D. The "Epistle to the Galatians" (c. 51 A.D.) was written to settle a dispute between two factions. One said the Law of Moses and Christ were the same; the other held that they were different.
 1. Paul holds for the latter interpretation and says that there is no need to follow such Mosaic laws as circumcision or dietary observances.
 2. This is a signal contribution to Christianity. Unlike Judaism and Islam, it is not (at least at this point) to be a legalistic religion. Paul's concept is to move from the letter of the Law to fulfill its spirit.
 3. This makes the religion more acceptable to a wider range of people and is important in the growth of Christianity to a world religion over time.
- E. "First Corinthians" is well-known for its discourse on love. In it, Paul is attempting to create a Christian ethos, in effect, a new Jerusalem.
 1. He discusses sex as well as love, stating that monogamy is right, that it is better to marry than to burn in Hell.
 2. He emphasizes the ascetic element. He tries to straighten out sex lives at the same time that he is writing a testimony to love.
- F. "Second Corinthians" is a composite of letters and discusses Christian life as a new creation.
- G. The "Epistle to the Romans" is Paul's best attempt at a coherent theology. However, some passages seem contradictory.
 1. He holds that people are intrinsically sinful and that mankind is basically in bondage to this world.
 2. This sin can be redeemed through Christ and baptism in His name. Only then can people achieve free will.
 3. There is no guarantee, but the possibility of sanctification is held out.

4. Faith is what ties the Christian and Jewish traditions, but a corner has been turned.
- II. The "Epistle to the Colossians," if authentic, is Paul's last missive.
 1. It emphasizes faith, hope and charity as central Christian virtues. Of these, charity is the greatest, since it is associated with love.
 2. Faith is borrowed from the Old Testament.
 3. Hope is not a virtue in all traditions. In Greece, for example, it was the best of the vices. The Pauline view is that hope is the tie between faith and love.
 4. In this sense, Christianity could be seen as being subversive in that it offered alternative values. This held out hope to the miserable, who could look for a final reckoning and perhaps a reversal of fortune: "the last shall be first." The emphasis on hope can be seen as moving early Christianity into the realm of a "political movement."
- I. If some of the epistles are not actually by Paul, then they are by someone with congruent interests. The difference between the true and spurious ones is not that great, given Paul's own ambiguity. We need to consider all the epistles, genuine or otherwise, to fully appreciate their total message and importance.
- IV. Mosaic Law required ritual observances which Paul says it is possible to go beyond. But as we see in "Romans," there are contradictions.
 - A. Tensions within Paul have caused later ambiguity and even internal strife within belief. However, although Paul may waffle on the two Laws (Mosaic and Christian), he never vacillates on universality with respect to moral law. He is the apostle to the world.
 - B. In this regard, he differs from the authors of the Synoptic Gospels.
 1. Matthew and Mark see continuity between the two laws, with insular references.
 2. Paul wants to go beyond, with the letter of the law turned into the spirit of the law. In 1 Corinthians, for example, he says that the body (of the Church) is one with many members, yet they are all of one spirit.

Essential Reading:

- "The Epistle of Paul to the Romans," *in toto*.
- "The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians," *in toto*.
- "The Second Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians," *in toto*.

Supplementary Reading:

Sanders, Chap. 1-3.

Segal, *in toto*.
The other Pauline epistles.

Questions to Consider:

1. What are the main Christian virtues according to Paul? In what ways do they continue Jewish tradition and in what ways do they chart new ground? Do these virtues explain why the Romans were so anti-Christian, or was there more to it than this?
2. Does Paul deviate from the teachings of Jesus? Some commentators wryly observe that the religion should be called "Paulianity." Is Christianity the message of Christ, or of Paul? What does Paul himself tell us about this?

Lecture Ten

Revelation and the Eschaton

Scope: This lecture examines the Book of Revelation, one of the most enigmatic and hard-to-interpret books of the Bible. It reviews the various visions recounted by its author, paying special attention to numerological and other symbolism and to the way in which the book hearkens back to Old Testament themes.

Outline

- I. *Revelation* is the perfect capstone to the Bible.
 - A. This concluding book has density and reach unlike anything else in the Bible. It is futile, however, to try to find a final interpretation of this book.
 1. It is written in Greek, and is an "uncovering," a literary genre that flourished during the two centuries after Christ. There are touches of this style in the prophets Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel.
 2. The community around Jesus was interested in apocalyptic literature. Recall that *Mark* suggests that current signs in the world are the labor pains of the end to come. Such sentiments, and such literature, are common when people feel oppressed and menaced.
 - B. *Revelation* has been dated to two periods: the earlier (c. 69 A.D.) is just before the destruction of the Temple by the Romans in 70 A.D. The later period is c. 95 A.D. in the reign of the Emperor Domitian.
- II. The bulk of *Revelation* consists of the visions of John, who may or may not be the same John of the Gospel and other writings; scholars disagree on this point.
 - A. The bulk of the book consists of the visions of this John. It hard to say if there is a plot or sequence.
 1. The first vision is from Jesus Himself; He interprets it. All the "sevens" referred to in the vision are angels.
 2. The second vision, of the heavenly enthroned One, involves twenty four elders and a heavenly chorus. The enthroned God holds a scroll, not a tablet; this is significant because papyrus doesn't last forever, like stone. The scroll is sealed. Who has the right to open it?
 3. The answer is the Lamb of God (Christ). The scroll contains the Old and New Testaments. A magic number, seven, is introduced. Six scrolls are unrolled, containing wars and rumors of war. We expect a cataclysm, but at this point an angel commands the

unrolling to stop and seals the seventh scroll. The angel then announces that the elect will be saved, but others can become elect.

4. Now comes the seventh seal, but instead of destruction, there is silence for half an hour, then seven trumpets call. There are new calamities, transgressors destroyed, etc., then seven thunderclaps.
5. John is commanded to eat the last scroll, which is sweet in his mouth and bitter in his stomach. The anti-Christ enters and kills two martyrs. Martyr (witness) now means witness unto death (parenthetically, the Romans wonder why these Christians would die so willingly).

B. The scene next moves to Heaven, where a woman clothed in sun is about to deliver a child.

1. She is attacked by a dragon (symbolizing Satan) who wants to eat her offspring. The New Testament has a stronger sense of the opposition of Good and Evil.
2. A second beast arrives, this is Rome, sitting on seven hills. The mystical number "666" is ascribed to the beast. Rome encourages idolatry. The Jews are thus threatened by Hellenism as well as by Rome, from inside their culture as well as from outside.
3. The battle continues. When will it all end? Finally, the Lamb is to be married to the Church. There is a wedding feast and the birds of the air are invited to eat at the corpses of kings. Society is thus symbolized as a meal together; the opposites are outcasts without burial that become food for scavengers.
4. But we are not at the end yet. The beast is put down into a pit. After 1,000 years (a millennium) it will be released and defeated. A new heaven and a new earth will come into being then.

C. The journey through *Revelation* is fraught with danger, inviting caution. When we reach the number seven, we stop; in fact, throughout this book, we always stop just before the brink.

III. Revelation harks back to the very beginning of the Bible.

- A. The Apocalypse is the beginning and the end of the Bible, connecting the earliest books with the last. It is the "alpha" and the "omega." This is stressed at the beginning of the text and at its end. This book hearkens us back to the whole story of the Bible.
- B. As early as in the Pentateuch, God is suggested as being providential. This idea is developed as a deliberate theme in the prophets.
 1. A providential God changes the meaning of things. Under such a God, acts have a double significance, both their immediate significance and one that prefigures later acts.

2. In *Revelation*, Babylon is used as a code for Rome; this is a typological way of reading (e.g., Moses and Jesus going into Egypt to escape persecution). Christians would argue that such acts have a deeper meaning than their appearance; for example, the Tree of Life in the Garden of Eden becomes the tree of the Crucifixion.

C. But the Apocalypse goes further. The old, the new, and the Kingdom to come are conjoined. The river in the Promised Land is like the river in Eden, a link of the end with the beginning. Even the primordial beast seems to have been dragged up from Babylonian mythology.

D. There is a persistent ambiguity in *Revelation*, and we can explore three possibilities. We can say (perhaps cynically) that such prophecies should not be clear, that there is a purpose to the evasion. We have here a perpetual code that draws a community of readers together. This is one possibility. What, then, are the other two?

Essential Reading:

The Revelation of John, in toto.

Supplementary Reading:

Bauckham, *in toto*, but especially Chapter 1.

Questions to Consider:

1. What is the significance of chiliasm (belief in the Millennium) for Christianity?
2. Discuss the numerological symbolism in *Revelation* and compare it with that in *John* (Lecture 8)

Lecture Eleven

Augustine and the Christian Self

Scope: Augustine, more than any other theological figure, reconciled biblical religion with Greek philosophy. The record of his conversion is the first autobiography in the Western intellectual tradition. Augustine's struggle against Manicheism and Pelagianism helped define Christian orthodoxy through the Middle Ages, while his emphasis on human depravity and the limitations of reason greatly influenced the Reformation.

Outline

I. Augustine is a pivotal figure in the theological tradition of the West.

- A. Aurelius Augustinus (354 A.D. - 430 A.D.), Bishop of Hippo in North Africa, is the most influential theologian in the Western Christian tradition.
 - 1. He is an important bridge between antiquity and medieval Europe, writing as he did near the end of the Western Roman Empire.
 - 2. Because of the scope of his theological writings and his role in the early Church combating heresy and defining doctrine, Augustine is recognized as a Church Father by the Roman Catholic Church.
- B. Augustine was raised as a Christian by his mother, St. Monica, but became an adherent of Manicheism when he went to Carthage to study rhetoric.
 - 1. He lived a dissolute and sinful life, but underwent a conversion experience in Milan, influenced by his studies of neo-Platonism and the preachings of St. Ambrose.
 - 2. This period is covered in his work, *Confessions*, the first autobiography in Western literature, and his saga is the formula for Christian biography in general: a sinful beginning, strong conversion experience, and an increasing concern with spiritual matters.
 - 3. He became a saint by forsaking his sinful ways and doctrinally wrong beliefs and reading the Bible, but he attributed his conversion to the freely given grace of God. In a way, this makes his work impersonal, rather than otherwise.

II. Augustine sought a spiritual path between two heresies: Manicheism (or Manicheanism) and Pelagianism.

- A. Manicheism can be considered as an intuitive treatment of the Christian tradition. At its center is the theodicy question (cf. Lecture 4: *Job* and

the Problem of Evil), that is, why does evil happen to good people, if there is an almighty and loving God?

- 1. Mani, a Persian (c. 217 A.D. - 266 A.D.) was the founder of a religion which fused several faith traditions, including parts of Christianity. He believed that there were two gods, one good, one evil and that history is the conflict between the two.
- 2. This view promotes Satan and solves the problem of evil. But it is certainly not monotheistic. There is still an inconsistency, namely, where did the second (evil) god come from? If Yahweh created him, why?
- B. St. Augustine, who had been a Manichee, struggled with this heresy after his conversion and provided the canonical refutation of it.
 - 1. Establishing that the second god means that we are not responsible for the evil we do.
 - 2. This abdication of moral responsibility leads to moral fatalism.
 - 3. Augustine also argued against the astrology in Manicheism by using the example of the slave's child, born at the same time as he was, as proof that the stars do not decide one's fate.
- C. The second heresy was Pelagianism, named after Pelagius (c. 355 A.D. - 455 A.D.), a British monk and theologian who lectured in Africa and Palestine. Pelagianism is almost an opposite kind of heresy from Manicheism.
 - 1. Pelagius argued that if people were proper and moral, any Christian could be saved. This is a doctrine of works. It seems almost Athenian; indeed, it is perfectionism, a fairly sure path to salvation.
 - 2. Augustine attempted this doctrine, but found all his works came to naught. He couldn't generate grace on his own.
 - 3. Augustine overcame Pelagian doctrine by advancing the doctrine of Original Sin. People are inherently sinful and therefore it is arrogant to think that we can save ourselves through works or any other way. He really is trying to navigate between two extremes: pessimism (innate human depravity) and optimism (salvation through works).
- D. Augustine thus undermined the leading pretenders, or challengers, to Christianity. He established the mainstream of Western Christianity.
 - 1. Augustine was the first to stress the internal life of Christians, the domain of the conscience.
 - 2. His is a deterministic, providential theory of history. God already knows everything, but we don't know; thus we must fight the battle every day. He worked hard at this paradox. God can work out the contradiction, but it is harder for us to resolve.

III. Augustine's *Confessions* represent a seminal work in Western civilization.

A. The *Confessions* represents Augustine's journey toward the Word.

1. The work begins the tradition of autobiography. It is unlike the biographical writings of Plutarch and others. It is not a vanity narrative, but rather the account of a path from sin to grace.
2. As an infant, we see his ability to work with words. By uttering certain words, you make the "inside" become "outside." This book is about movement from words to the Word.
3. Augustine is also laying the foundation for the Middle Ages. He is writing near the end of the Roman Empire. Augustine is abandoning the classical conceptions of self. The world of Babylon is ending, and henceforth, there will be a new conception of self leading into the medieval period.

B. There are thirteen books in the *Confessions*. They are oddly organized, but we can't really say that they are badly organized.

1. In the first ten books, he narrates the story of his life; the rest seems like an anti-climax, an appendix.
2. But it is possible to view it differently, as symbolic of his longing for communion with the divine. Therefore, his life leads up to the final point where he has the ability to really read and understand the Scriptures, which is what the last three chapters are about. This is the timeless and spaceless realm of the Scriptures.

C. A brief narrative summary of *Confessions* will help to develop some of the important themes.

1. There is throughout a fascination with words.
2. There is an obsession with sinfulness and the attractiveness of evil.
3. Augustine outlines his battle with Manicheism, his meeting with Bishop Ambrose in Milan and his idea of the allegorical interpretation of the Scriptures.
4. He tells of hearing a child saying "tolle; lege" or "take up; read," which he does with the Bible, opening it at random.
5. He sends away his mistress, accepts without reservation the Biblical faith, is baptized, becomes a monk and then a bishop.
6. In Book 9, his mother (Monica) dies; she is a personification of the Church, which becomes, in effect, his new mother after her death.

D. The last part of the book shows that he has learned how to read the Word. It deals with *Genesis*, which he advances as an allegory of what happens to the soul of the believer. There is a genesis every day, a rebirth into the eternal truth of the Scriptures.

Essential Readings:

Confessions, in toto.

Supplementary Reading:

Mallard, in toto.

McMahon, Chap. 1-3.

Questions to Consider:

1. In Lecture 9, we posed the question whether Christianity could be termed "Paulianity" because of Paul's important role in spreading the Word of God and commenting on the teachings of Christ. The doctrinal and other writings of St. Augustine (such as his sermons, letters and *City of God*) exerted an extensive influence on the entire course of medieval Christianity and indeed form the basis of much of the thought of the reformers Luther and Calvin. Could it be argued that Western Christianity might better be called "Augustinianity?" Support your position.
2. Reprise Augustine's arguments against Manicheism and Pelagianism. He also fought against another heresy, that of Donatism. What were the doctrinal and organizational implications of the Donatist heresy on the early Church?

Lecture Twelve

Meister Eckhart: From Whom God Hid Nothing

Scope: The medieval German theologian, Meister Eckhart, was one of the greatest Christian mystics whose sermons, both luminous and difficult, attempt to gesture at a form of spiritual illumination which is outside the domain of language. His uniquely personal and poetic sermons are an invitation to, rather than an explanation of, religious experience, his ecstatic apprehension of the Deity intended to provoke in his hearers a similar search for divine illumination.

Outline

- I. Johannes Eckhart (c. 1260 - c. 1328) is probably the most important mystic theologian in the Christian tradition.
 - A. Eckhart was a Dominican friar, who is best remembered for his sermons, which are really transcripts of his mystical experiences. Mysticism in the Western Christian tradition has always had an uneasy place.
 1. Mysticism resists linguistic formulation. To some extent, he surmounted that problem.
 2. He is the greatest figure in non-scholastic theology, one who knew the scholastic tradition of Aquinas and others, but took his own road; "logic chopping" was not his way.
 - B. Mystical experience presents certain problems because it is ultimately private. Eckhart gestures at something that no one can really discuss.
 1. His lectures are perhaps the most effective gestures that we have in this vein of religious thought. He offers a rich series of images and metaphors to talk about our internal religious experience.
 2. He often writes from God's perspective and invites the listener/reader to step out of space and time, and try to perceive the world from God's perspective.
 3. For this approach, he earned the sobriquet "He from whom God hid nothing."
 4. He is one of the greatest prose poets, even if he might have considered poetry profane. After Eckhart, German replaced Latin as the primary language of popular tracts.
- II. Eckhart employs a variety of rhetorical techniques in the service of his arguments.
 - A. The first technique we notice is surprise. He finishes one of his discussions by saying "Love has no why." It is not at all clear what this

means, but it leads toward much meditation. It is perplexing, but not threatening.

- B. He also uses paradoxes. It's the basic stuff of his sermons.
 1. The end of your longings will be to abolish your self until your will and God's will are the same.
 2. At that point, you will ask nothing of God and will be released from your cares into a state of pure adoration.
 3. His paradoxes are deep and provocative, and enter a realm where theology merges with poetry, becoming enigmatic and stimulating.
- C. The most important technique is metaphor; this is his stock in trade.
 1. For example, he says that "God is on sale at very reasonable prices," a compact, inspired, very economical metaphor.
 2. Great artists make the difficult seem easy and Meister Eckhart is a great artist. He is telling us not to try to cheat God, that good works will not sanctify us because if we were already in God's good graces, we wouldn't have such concerns.
- D. He is involved, ultimately, in word magic. He is not to be taken literally, although what he writes has a kernel of meaning.
 1. He states that divine nature has no name, which really means that human language is not big enough to comprise God. Thus, metaphor is advantageous.
 2. He says that God is a word that speaks itself. How is this to be reconciled with the statement that God has no name? This is paradox, mysticism, an area not bound by logic.
 3. If you read Eckhart with charity, you will find him to be a valuable thinker. He claims all words come from the Word. He wants to push on beyond the tradition of theology, advocating a personal connection with God. Language is the means to do this, to gesture towards God.

III. Meister Eckhart is the greatest unsystematic theologian of Catholicism.

- A. Although God is ineffable, we feel a longing to talk about this ineffability. The problem is how best to do this.
 1. To Eckhart, there is more to religion than logic. He shows us the way out of our labyrinth of words.
 2. His stance toward the divine is characteristic of mystics of every religion, of every time.
- B. Eckhart makes a distinction between God and the Godhead.
 1. God is the avenue to the Godhead, which is the ineffable divine essence, totally static. God is the dynamic Creator whereas the Godhead is the foundation of the God of creation. God and the Godhead are really as far apart as heaven is from Earth.

2. A thinker like Thomas Hume would disdain such nebulosity, but this distinction is worth pondering. The Godhead is unspeakable, whereas we can call God Yahweh or by some other name. What people think God is only the entryway to God's vastness.
3. The charitable reading of mysticism is that it's trying to gesture at something transcendent.
- C. The analogy between God and Godhead is that between *grund*, or foundation, of the soul compared to the faculties.
 1. One's experience of oneself is internal, like our experience of God.
 2. Reason, emotion, memory, these are the faculties, part of one's soul that can be talked about. But *grund* is unspeakable, God's ineffable spark.
 3. We can't prove this point, nor can we doubt it. In fact, we have here the embryo of Cartesianism. We must accept God's illumination as it comes.
 4. He has an interesting psychology of conversion: when one receives grace, the divine spark bursts into flame and the soul undergoes a change, as in St. Augustine.

IV. The language of mysticism requires a constant search for metaphor.

- A. It breaks down to subject and object, first of all, the distinction between the knower and the known. To do this we must search for metaphors.
 1. It would proceed like this: "My eye is my eye (identity). My eye is like a window (simile); My eye is a window (metaphor)."
 2. Metaphor always attributes identity to two things that are not identical. If you want to be strictly logical, you have to use a simile.
 3. Mystics are not afraid to speak metaphorical nonsense, if it is meaningful nonsense. This is why poetry and theology will never be entirely logical. Metaphors speak with more than one tongue, one voice; they never give one and only one answer. When you put them together is when you receive divine grace.
- B. Some of Eckhart's metaphors are very interesting.
 1. He says that his eye and God's eye are one and the same. Thus he holds out the possibility that humans can adopt a divine perspective, apart from time and space.
 2. He talks about divinity being poured into him.
 3. Metaphor is thus to Eckhart as irony is to Socrates. Like spiritual midwives, these techniques help with the birth of ideas or the infusion of God into the soul.
- V. All mystics face a similar problem in communicating their perspective. It is often difficult to figure out what they are talking about. If one wants all language in a procrustean mold, then Eckhart is going to be unacceptable.

- A. But Eckhart, from another vantage point, can be very illuminating. It is hard to remain immune to his metaphors.
 1. For example, he says that God has never spoken to him, but he has heard him clear his throat.
 2. Read him with charity and do not insist on a positivistic sense of language. Eckhart is not to everyone's taste.
- B. It should be no surprise that Eckhart was accused of heresy (in 1329, Pope John XXII issued a papal bull declaring seventeen of his positions as being heretical). But as he himself stated, "Those are wrong who take the way rather than God."

Essential Reading:

Johannes Eckhart, selected German Sermons in *Selected Writings*, pp. 109-252.

Supplementary Reading:

Forman *in toto*.

Tobin, Chap. 1-2.

Questions to Consider:

1. How (and why) does Meister Eckhart distinguish between God and the Godhead? Is this distinction important? If so, why? What implications does it have for a monotheistic religion like Christianity?
2. Discuss Meister Eckhart's use of metaphor as a primary technique for approaching the ineffable.

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The Book of Isaiah.

The Book of Job.

Exodus.

Genesis

New Testament

The Acts of the Apostles

The Epistle of Paul to the Romans.

The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians.

The Gospel According to John.

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